

## **Ephesians 4:25-5:2 New International Version (NIV)**

<sup>25</sup> Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. <sup>26</sup> "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, <sup>27</sup> and do not give the devil a foothold. <sup>28</sup> Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

<sup>29</sup> Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. <sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup> Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. **5** <sup>1</sup> Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children <sup>2</sup> and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

## **John 6:35-51 New International Version (NIV)**

<sup>35</sup> Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. <sup>36</sup> But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. <sup>37</sup> All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. <sup>38</sup> For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. <sup>39</sup> And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. <sup>40</sup> For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day."

<sup>41</sup> At this the Jews there began to grumble about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." <sup>42</sup> They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?"

<sup>43</sup> "Stop grumbling among yourselves," Jesus answered. <sup>44</sup> "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day. <sup>45</sup> It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.'<sup>[a]</sup> Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from him comes to me. <sup>46</sup> No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. <sup>47</sup> Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life. <sup>48</sup> I am the bread of life. <sup>49</sup> Your ancestors ate the manna in the

wilderness, yet they died. <sup>50</sup> But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. <sup>51</sup> I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

“It’s Not Quick Bread”

Lisa Durkee Abbott

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A lot of people like to claim that they are “spiritual, but not religious,” and I really have been trying to understand what that means. I sit with this phrase often, wondering whether I am somehow spiritual *and* religious. For some who describe themselves this way, it apparently means that their sense of a higher power is, well, themselves on a good day. Really. Secular humanism means that we humans have all that we need to do right by each other, and if we try hard, we can do that. We can give to each other all that we need, beginning with ourselves. To be spiritual but not religious, for these folks then, means believing very strongly in something—in people—but not in God.

That isn’t what I read in the Gospel. Jesus, who is not only my God but also my teacher, says that we must love the lord our God . . . Sure, this all rests on the fact that I believe in God. It’s true. I do, and I believe in Jesus. Not that I don’t believe in humanity and our potential for goodness, but I have yet to see this world function well for any period of time. I have learned of God’s goodness, though, and I have seen God turn bad into good, death into life, weak resignation into hope. I have learned of God’s goodness, and I believe that Jesus is the way. That’s what he told us, remember? *I am* the way. So, it’s also all well and good to say that one is spiritual, but not religious. For those of us who want to or do call ourselves Christian, though, we not only believe in God, we believe in each other. Very often, though, I have the sense that some of our spiritual but not religious friends and family believe in their own power for goodness—with which I agree. However, they apparently *don’t* believe in that same potential in others. Maybe

that is what keeps some people from church. Of course it is sometimes very difficult to believe in God, especially when things are not going well. Others, though, stay away from church for reasons much closer to home. It's you and I in whom they don't believe—not as a collected body. You see, we are still proving ourselves.

That has been obvious to Lillian Daniels, a pastor and writer in the United Church of Christ, who wrote a brief response to this idea of spiritual but not religious in a post on our denomination website. She says, “Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.”

I hope that this doesn't all sound kind of negative. It shouldn't. I have no doubt that we all need to “work out our own salvation,” as Paul wrote to the Philippians. What is clear from Paul, though, may help us know why we are moved to worship together; what we are working out is how we respond to our already having been “saved.” Insert air quotes here, because our being saved too often gets thrown into some sense of a future promise and nothing of the joy that comes with living into all that good grace now. A. Powell Davies, a most prominent preacher of the mid-twentieth century who moved from Methodism to Unitarianism, shared a passage that I would echo as my hope for us here in the Congregational Church, UCC of Blue Hill. “Let me tell you why I come to church. I come to church and would whether I was a preacher or not because I fall below my own standards and need to be constantly brought back to them. I am afraid of becoming selfish and indulgent, and my church of the free spirit brings me back to what I want to be. I could easily despair; doubt and dismay could overwhelm me. My church renews my courage and my hope. It is not enough that I should think about the world and its problems at the level of a newspaper report or magazine discussion. It could too soon become too low a level. I must have my conscience sharpened until it goads me to the most thorough and responsible thinking of which I am capable. I must feel again the love I owe to others. I must not only hear about it but feel it. In church, I

do. I am brought toward my best, in every way toward my best." (A. Powell Davies, 1902-1957)

There is some irony in quoting Davies, and some of you may like to do a bit of reading to know the reasons his own faith journey moved toward what we may call greater humanism. But I would share with you that *I* need church to be about what takes us out of ourselves, toward the ideal life God would have us enjoy.

Sometimes, though, we are just very hungry without recognizing the nourishment in front of us. We have lost enough energy that the idea of preparing a spiritual meal for ourselves is more than we can muster. And here is where I find great hope in coming to church, and particularly to enjoying the sacraments.

I want to remind you this morning that Jesus has done 99% of the work for us. Jesus is the bread of life, and the cup of blessing, poured out for us and for the whole world. So, what does it mean to be nourished in this way? You see, nourishment is really what we're after, isn't it? For those of us who wonder at Jesus' kind of inscrutable statements about bread and water, and about wine that is also blood, we can begin by thinking about our most basic needs. Jesus wants us to know that he provides our most basic need, so he chooses the most basic of our physical needs to get there. We need to eat. We need to feed our bodies. We also need to feed our spirits. To help us understand what it means to feed our spiritual selves, to bring us to a place of contentment and goodness; to a place of rightness with God that is satisfaction—being full—Jesus gave us what we need. He fed us. He became the bread of life so that we would not hunger any more.

I have been grateful for a new friend's writing. Mary Luti, who had been pastor at First Church of Cambridge, MA for eight years, also taught at Andover Newton, but before and after my own time there. Mary continues to write in response to each week's scripture lessons, and I want to share part of her discussion with you today as we consider what to make of the Communion meal. She asks, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Well, as we've seen, for some of us *he can't*. We stay put when others go to church to eat at the table. Or we come to church, but we look for something other than flesh and blood—for inner peace, or a sense of community, a feeling we

might be able to find elsewhere as well, but can reliably find once a month attached to the communion ritual in church.

“How can he give us flesh to eat?”

Well, for some of us *it isn't*. It's a *metaphor*, a symbol, a *spiritual* experience, as if powerful metaphors get us off the hook of reality; as if spirituality were a subjective, ethereal, disembodied thing that had nothing to do with blood and flesh.”

O.K., Mary—o.k., Lisa, this is getting a little bit creepy. For people who heard Jesus' words in the beginning, it really might have been too creepy to make them want to join in. When we talk today about being fed at the table of Jesus, we also need to wonder about how we're being heard. While it's probably true that no one in this day and age thinks we are celebrating cannibalism, that wasn't always the case. And now, our talk of the Body of Christ may not be creepy, but might be too empty for people to hear, or too quietly spoken. For some of us here today, it may be that talk of the bread of life doesn't resonate, because we are hungry, and we need our feeding now.

The bread that is Jesus isn't a quick bread, though. We don't pour Jesus into a pan, mix with water, and watch an instantaneous miracle of baking. There is a leavening process at work, and while Jesus may be the yeast, it has to work in us. Maybe we can say in thinking of Paul's words, it has *to be worked out in us*. And remember the part of bread making from scratch that is pounding down the dough before letting it rise to fullness! Sometimes it seems we are pounded down a few more times than necessary, doesn't it? Still, we are told that we can do all things through Christ, who strengthens us. But what if we haven't yet felt full? How can we move forward in faith, religiously, when we are still hungry?

Please let me wax ancient theology with you. St. Augustine said that God not only offers us Grace in loving us *in spite of* ourselves, but wants what is good and right for us—so much that God became one of us. God graces us with the ability to do right each day. God is at work in the goodness we do, said Augustine. So, before we try to do everything that is possible with God, before we consider eating a full meal of possibility, maybe we can begin with a snack of sorts.

In our faith in Jesus, we are fed. Jesus wants what is good for us. When we wonder what that goodness is, we can read the Gospels, and know especially from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that he wants peace and fulfillment for everyone, beginning with the least of these—the meek and the lowly. When we seek religion, sometimes it appears that we are looking for the most of these, and to become one of them. Our religion could not be any simpler, though it often sounds difficult and lofty. We are fed by God's love for us, and we are asked to love others; we are asked to feed others. Is that feeding a quick bread? Are the things possible with God immediate and sure? No. Still, Paul has reminded us how we are to behave as we follow this religion of ours, even as we attempt to live a spiritual life. See how these two things can come into play again?

You see, for us to get at the best in ourselves, those lofty places of peace and contentment, we have to be right with those around us. So, Paul tells us what to do: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.<sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.<sup>31</sup> Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.<sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. 5<sup>1</sup> Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children<sup>2</sup> and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

What *is* our religion, if it is not to love one another, as God has loved us in Christ Jesus? What is our spirituality, if it is not to acknowledge Jesus' presence in us when we *do* love? We are fed by Jesus' love, and by God's grace, are empowered to love others. This is extraordinary, folks—so extraordinary that the news of its truth has us gathered here today, hoping that we might taste just a little of this nourishment. We do as Jesus does and asks us to do, and we are fed. May it be so for us, in this church, this house of religion, this Body of Christ. Amen.